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Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00
NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 /056 W
----------311135Z 042875 /12
R 310958Z DEC 76
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1138
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
DIA WASHDC
USCINCEUR

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 8885

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, SY
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ASAD'S ALAWITE OPPONENTS MAKE UNSUCCESSFUL
BID FOR POWER

REF: (A) DAMASCUS 8575, (B) 8572, (C) 8571, (D) 8542

1. SUMMARY: ACCORDING TO OUR BEST INFORMATION, IN EARLY
DECEMBER GROUPS OF SYRIAN OFFICERS AND NCO'S ACTING IN COORDINATION
AND COMPOSED PREDOMINATLY OF ALAWAITES WERE MEETING TO
CRITICIZE REGIME AND MAY HAVE BEEN PLANNING ATTEMPT TO
UNSEAT PRES. ASAD AND CLEAN UP CORRUPTION IN MILITARY.
ONE GROUP CONSISTED OF SUPPORTERS OF
FORMER STRONGMAN SALAH HADID; SECOND GROUP, LED BY MAJ.
RAIQ NAQQARI, COMPOSED OF MEMBERS OF MURSHID CLAN TRADITIONALLY
CONSIDERED PRO-ASAD ALAWITES. DISSIDENT SOURCE BELIEVES
JADID MASTERMINED CREATION OF BOTH ORGANIZATIONS. SECURITY
OFFICIALS REPORTEDLY WORKING FROM LIST OF UP TO
600 NAMES OF OFFICERS AND CIVILIANS ALLEGEDLY INVOLVED.
ROUNDUP OF CONSPIRATORS RELIVES ASAD OF IMMEDIATE
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PRESSURES BUT PUTS HIM ON NOTICE THAT HE HAS TO DEAL
WITH SERIOUS AND DETERMINED OPPOSITION OMVEMENT AT
INTERSECTION OF ALWAITE COMMUNITY AND SYRIAN OFFICER
COPRS. UMRAN OFFICERS NOT INVOLVED, BUT THEY PLEASED
WITH ATTEMPTED COUP AND BELIEVE DIRECTION OF INTERNAL
POLITICAL EVENTS FAVORS THEIR MULTI-SECTARIAN APPROACH

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TO INTERNAL POWER-SHARING. EVIDENCE OF DISSATISFACTION
WITHIN ALWAITE COMMUNITY MAY ALSO HAVE STIMULATED EFFORTS
BY NON-ALWAITE SYRIAN DISSIDENT POLITICIANS TO ORGANIZE
BROAD NATIONAL OPPOSITION FRONT TO REGIME. DURABILITY
OF JADID-UMRAN-ASAD RIVALRY AS A SIGNIFICANT ELEMENT OF
SYRIAN POLITICS ONCE AGAIN DEMONSTRATED. EMBASSY DOES
NOT BELIEVE COUP ATTEMPT WILL DERAIL ASAD FROM EFFORTS
TO REACH NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT WITH ISRAEL, BUT PRE-
OCCUPATION WITH INTERNAL FENCE-MENDING MAY INHIBIT HIM
FROM
PLAYING INNOVATIVE ROLE OR TAKING HUBTIC INITIATIVES.
END SUMMARY.

2. HAVING SIFTED THROUGH VARYING LOCAL ACCOUNTS OF
ATTEMPTED COUP IN EARLY DECEMBER, EMBASSY SUBMITS
FOLLOWING AS BEST INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO US REGARDING
WHAT OCCURED. DISPIRITED OPPONENTS OF ASAD REGIME
WHOSE HOPES TO EXPLOIT LOCAL OPPOSITION TO SYRIAN
INTERVENTION IN LEBANON SETBACK BY RIYADH AND CAIRO
ACCORDS WEE ENCOURAGED BY UNEXPECTED EVIDENCE OF DISSIDENCE
AMONG ALAWITES CONSIDERED LOYAL TO PRESIDENT. REGIME
UNCOVERED TWO GROUPS OF PREDOMINATLY ALAWITE OFFICERS
AND NCO'S MEETING TO CRITICIZE REGIME AND PERHAPS
PLOTTING TO LAUNCH COUP ATTEMPT TIMED FOR DEC. 2
'ID AL-ADHA HOLIDAY. COUP PLANNING WAS ASSUMED TO BE
THE WORK OF LONG-STANDING ANTI-ASAD BAATHI LEADERS SALAH
JADID ANDIBRAHIM MAKHUS WITH ASSISTANCE FROM THEIR SUPPORTERS
IN ALAWITE COMMUNITY. JADID GROUP PROBABLY BEGAN
MEETING LAST SUMMER, WHEN ASAD FULLY PREOCCUPIED WITH
LEBANESE CRISIS AND DOUBTS ABOUT SYRIAN ROLE WERE
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FAIRLY WIDESPREAD IN ARMY CIRCLES. EMBASSY REPORTING
IN NOVEMBER (DAMASCUS 7896) NOTED THAT GROUP JADIDISTS
HAD TRIED TO ENLIST SUPPORT OF UMRAN OFFICERS TO OPPOSE
REGIME BUT WERE REBUFFED.

3. AMONG DISTURBING ASPECTS EMERGING FROM ON-GOING
INVESTIGATION WAS SUCCESS OF JADIDISTS IN RECRUITING
OFFICERS FROM BRANCH OF ALAWITE SECT PREVIOUSLY CON-
SIDERED LOYAL TO ASAD REGIME. ACCORDING TO OUR INFORMATION,
TWO ORGANIZATIONS IN MILITARY HAVE BEEN UNCOVERED,
ONE COMPRISING JADID PARTISANS AND SECOND, LED BY MAJ.
RAID NUQQARI, FROM MURSHID CLAN. TATTER CLAN HAS HAD PARTICULAR
REPUTATION FOR PRO-REGIME SYMPATHIES.
SOME RELIABLE SOURCES HAVE REPORTED SECURITY SERVICES
HAVE COMPLIED LIST OF 600 NAMES, INCLUDING OFFICERS,
NCO'S AND CIVILIANS SUPPOSEDLY ASSOCIATED WITH
CONSPIRACY. NUMBER OF ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS WAS PROBABLY
MUCH -- LOWER -- PERHAPS 125-200 -- BECAUSE, ACCORDING

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TO ONE ACCONT, OFFICERS BEING INTERROGATED FROM NUQQAARI GROUP FREELY DIVULGED NAMES OF ACUQAINTANCES IN CLAN IN EFFORT TO EMBARRASS AND CONFUSE SECURITY PERSONNEL AND CREATE IMPRESSION OF WIDE-SPREAD ALAWITE OPPOSITION TO REGIME. IT WOULD ALSO BE EXPECTED THAT SECURITY SERVICES WOULD INTERROGATE ON WIDER BASIS THAN ACTUAL CONSPIRACY.

4. IT IS UNCLEAR HOW FAR ALONG THESE GROUPS WERE IN THEIR PLANNING. HAMOUD SHOUFI FOR ONE IS PERSUADED THAT A CONCRETE ATTEMPT HAD BEEN PLANNED FOR DECEMBER 2. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE ALGERIAN AMBASSADOR, WHO IS WELL INTRODUCED IN LEFTIST AND REVOLUTIONARY INTELLECTUAL CIRCLES, BELIEVES THE ARRESTS WERE ENTIRELY PREVENTATIVE. IN HIS VIEW ASAD AND HIS SECURITY SERVICES WERE FULLY AWARE OF DEVELOPING CRITICISM IN SOME OFFICER CIRCLES AND MOVED IN AT FIRST SIGNS THAT CRITICISM MIGHT BE LEADING TO ACTIVE PLOTTING.

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5. QUESTION BOTH DISSIDENTS AND ASAD LOYALISTS NOW ASKING IS WHETHER OTHER GROUPS SIMILAR TO NUQQARI ORGANIZATION EXIST. TWO WELL-PLACED SOURCES HAVE SUGGESTED THAT JADID HAS OTHER ASSETS IN RESERVE AWAITING PROPER TIME TO MOVE. OTHER GROUPS OF JUNIOR OFFICERS MAY ALSO HAVE BEGUN ORGANIZING, AND PROBABLY SHARE NUQQARI'S

REPORTEDANTI-CORRUPTION SENTIMENTS. THEY ALSO MAY PERCEIVE THAT ASAD CONFRONTS DISCONTENT AT INTER-SECTION OF ALAWITE COMMUNITY AND OFFICER CORPS AND AS ONE ACTIVE DISSIDENT HAS OBSERVED, THIS WILL MAKE CONTACTS BETWEEN ALAWITE AND NON-ALWAITE DISSIDENTS EASIER. ONE OF THESE SOURCES EVEN SPECULATES THAT INCIDENT WILL STIMULATE FORMATION OF LINKS BETWEEN ALWAITE OFFICERS AND NON-ALAWITE POLITICIANS LEADING TO CREATION OF MULTI-SECTARIAN OPPOSITION FRONT. HE PREDICTS IT WILL ALSO ENHANCE POSITION OF UMRAN OFFICERS, WHOSE POLITICAL ORIENTATION IS MULTI-SECTARIAN IN APPROACH UMRAN OFFICERS, WITH WHOM HE HAS BEEN IN RECENT CONTACT, WERE NOT INVOLVED IN RECENT COUP ATTEMPT AND ARE PLEASED WITH DIRECTION EVENTS ARE TAKING INTERNALLY. SOURCE CONCLUDED THAT ONLY WAY TO DEAL WITHPRESENT SECTARIAN PROBLEMS IN SYRIA IS THROUGH POWER-SHARING ARRANGEMENT DIVIDING KEY MILITARY AND CIVILIAN POSITIONS AMONG ADHERENTS OF VARIOUS RELIGIOUS SECTS.

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ACTION NEA-10

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NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 /056 W
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R 310958Z DEC 76
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1139
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
DIA WASHDC
USCINCEUR

S E C R E T SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 8885

6. COMMENT: DISCOVERY OF TWO ORGANIZED GROUPS OF ALWAITE OFFICERS CRITICIZING AND PERHAPS CONSPIRING AGAINST ASAD HAS APPARENTLY CAUGHT BOTH REGIME AND MANY OF ITS OPPONENTS OFF-BALANCE. PRESIDENT ASAD IS VERY CONSCIOUS OF NEED TO MAINTAIN COHESION OF HIS POWER BASE IN ARMY AND ALWAITE COMMUNITY AND CAN BE EXPECTED TO DEVOTE MUCH ATTENTION IN COMING MONTHS TO FENCE-MENDING ACTIVITIES AMONG FELLOW ALAWITES AND MEMBERS OF OFFICER CORPS. REPORTED FOCUS OF CONSPIRATORS ON NEED TO CLEAN UP WHAT THEY VIEW AS PERVASIVE CORRUPTION WITHIN MILITARY WILL NOT FACILITATE ASAD'S TASK, SINCE HIS REGIME HAS FOSTERED CREATION OF MILITARY ELITE ENJOYING WEALTH AND PRIVILEGES THAT CUSHION SENIOR OFFICERS FROM ECONOMIC PROBLEMS SHARED BY REST OF POPULATION. ENCOURAGEMENT WHICH REVELATION OF DIVISIONS WITHIN ALWAITE COMMUNITY MAY GIVE TO NON-ALWAITE OPPOSITION AND POTENTIAL OPPOSITION, INCLUDING CONTACTS ACROSS SECTARIAN LINES, MUST ALSO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT.

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7. INCIDENT MARKS RE-EMERGENCE OF SALAH JADID AS ACTIVE INFLUENCE IN SYRIAN POLITICAL LIFE. CRITICIZED BY MEMBERS OF HIS OWN CLAN FOR ADOPTING EXTREMIST POLICIES

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TO DETRIMENT OF TRIBAL INTEREST, JADID WAS REPLACED AS
LEADER OF "JADIDISTS" BY IBRAHIM MAKHUS (WHO PROBABLY
REMAINS DEVOTED TO HIS FORMER PATRON). HOWEVER, JADID
HAS BEEN IN CONTACT WITH VARIOUS DISSIDENTS FROM HIS
JAIL CELL (HAMOUD SHOUFI CLAIMS HE HAD CONDUCTED THREE
DEBATES WITH JADID VIA INTERMEDIARIES). OUT-MANEUVERED
BY ASAD IN 1970, HUMILIATED AMONG HIS OWN PEOPLE,
IMPRISONED AND PERHPAS IN FAILING HEALTH, JADID APPARENTLY
STILL MAINTAINS AMBITIONS OF RETURNING TO POWER.

8. UMRAN OFFICERS APPEAR TO BE MANEUVERING SHREWDLY
TO MAINTAIN THEIR POSITIONS NEAR CENTER OF POWER YET
STAY UNTAINTED FROM TOO CLOSE ASSOCIATION WITH ASAD.
LED BY BRIG. ISKANDAR SALAMAH AND INCLUDING FIRST
ARMORED DIVISION COMMANDER BRIG. TAWFIQ JUHNI AND
PROBABLY FORMER THRID ARMORED DIVISION COMMANDER
BRIG. ALI HUSSEIN, UMRANISTS SIGNALLED THEIR OPPOSITION
TO ASAD POLICY IN LEBANON LAST SPRING BUT HAVE MADE NO
OVERT MOVE AGAINST ASAD. ACCORDING TO THE DISSIDENT
SOURCE IN CONTACT WITH THEM, THEY HAVE REMAINED UNTOUCHED
BY CORRUPTION SCANDALS AND BELIEVE THEIR STRONG CARD AGAINST
REGIME IS RIF'AT AL-ASAD. UMRANISTS ARE CENTRIST SWING
GROUP, OPEN TO MULTI-SECTARIAN CONTACTS AND OPPOSED TO
ALAWITE MONOPOLIZATION OF POWER. LATEST INCIDENTS
DEMONSTRATE DURABILITY OF ASAD-JADID-UMRAN RIVALRY AS
A CONTINUING FORCE IN SYIAN POLITICS, THOUGH IT IS
PROBABLY WANING.

9. WHILE ASAD MAY HAVE TO DEVOTE CONSIDERABLE ATTENTION
TO INTERNAL POLITICS AS RESULT OF THESE EVENTS, WE
DO NOT EXPECT THEY WILL OBLIGE HIM TO WITHDRAW WYRIA FROM
INVOLVEMENT IN EFFORTS TO SEEK NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT WITH
ISRAEL. INDEED, SUCH INVOLVEMENT MAY BE USEFUL IN HELPING
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HIM KEEP HIS OPPONENTS
OFF BALANCE. NEVERTHELESS, PREOCCUPATION WITH INTERNAL
FENCE-MENDING MAY INHIBIT HIM FROM PLAYING INNOVATIVE
ROLE OR TAKING PUBLIC INITIATIVES REGARDING A SETTLEMENT.
HIS STRENGTHENED POSITION AS RESULT OF CAIRO AND
RIYADH, COMBINED WITH PREVIOUSLY EXHIBITED MASTERY OF
SYRIAN POLITICS, WILL MAKE HIM TOUGH FIGURE TO DISPLACE
BY ANY CONCEIVABLE COMBINATION OF OPPONENTS
MURPHY

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